

Marching to a Different Drummer

Sermon for Sunday Lent 3, Year B, 7 March 2021

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Exodus 20:1-7. Psalm 19. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. John 2:13-22

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Today we heard the Ten Commandments in our Exodus reading. We don't often hear them these days, though some of us who grew up using *The Book of Common Prayer*, with its Tudor language and its Tudor world view, will remember hearing the Ten Commandments read out every Sunday. Some churches like our cathedral in Goulburn even had them graven on big marble tablets for the front wall, so we could be reminded of them while we knelt at the altar rail. This was religion as a vehicle for social control, ensuring that all good boys and girls learned what was expected of them and knew their place. In my upbringing it was a religion of respectability, with no real understanding of grace or gospel. It was morality with pictures. Such a depleted version of

Christianity began to gain ground in the mother country once the Protestant Reformation and then the English Civil War were over, and England had sickened of religious controversy. Hence a turn away from doctrinal division to a Christianity of universal ethical truths that all reasonable people could agree on. So, thanks to John Locke and a new spirit of Enlightenment tolerance, Anglicans gravitated towards a religion of inoffensive decency that's light on doctrinal specifics.

But the Ten Commandments actually begin with doctrinal specifics. The God who liberated Israel from oppression in Egypt gives Israel this centrepiece of the law, which begins with a commandment setting out who God actually is and what God actually does. The Ten Commandments in my upbringing were a substitute for specific theological beliefs, but in fact they begin with theology. And our psalmist today reinforces the point, celebrating God's created law which is evident in the heavens then shifting seamlessly to the law of human life together with God—a law that's been given to Israel as a gift, for blessing and illuminating God's people.

And of course, God's people need this help and guidance, because of the presumptuous sins and secret faults that we're reminded of in today's psalm. So this whole vision of the law, including the ten commandments, is entirely specific to the God who blesses and cares and loves and guides—a God who's anything but that remote moralist who was kept on the mantelpiece in my childhood home, and many homes like it, to be taken down occasionally and dusted off.

My point is that it's easy to domesticate the ten commandments and lose touch with the God who blesses and summons us. We see a good example of this drift away from and eventual loss of touch with God in our Gospel today, in the state of things that had grown up in the Jerusalem Temple. John puts this encounter at the start of his Gospel to show how Jesus confronted religious decline and corruption, how opposed to it he was, and hence no doubt why he soon found himself in such hot water.

The money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals were more than just purveyors of religious trinkets, like

stallholders around the edge of St Peter's Square in Rome and elsewhere in the Catholic world. No, what we see in today's Gospel is price-gouging in a captive market, a bit like early capitalism when it dragged rural people into a cash economy to buy overpriced goods that couldn't be gotten any other way. The poor needed coin, which then had to be changed into Temple coinage, which didn't have any pagan symbols on it. Then they had to buy animals for the priests to sacrifice. The doves were for the poorest, who couldn't afford a sheep let alone a cow. Jesus is horrified by all this, and he stages a precursor of Gandhi's salt march, two thousand years early. He stands up for the poor among God's people and for God's own reputation, whose whole nature is to bless and to lift up, not to exploit and to alienate. His action isn't entirely radical, then. It's also thoroughly grounded in tradition, recovering a proper zeal for God's house—a zeal that Jesus later demonstrates in his own sacrifice, which he sees as fulfilling and forever thereafter annexing the Temple's mediating function.

Friends, you can see how the so-called Christian socialists in England found a vision here, with their conservative socialism grounded in the Gospel. These Anglo-Catholics of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries found here an alternative both to a radical and godless communism on the one hand, and to an unfeeling class of capitalists and rentiers on the other, who were chummy with the religious establishment. Here, Christianity and politics were woven fine in the service of a more compassionate and participatory society inspired by faith. And such a vision will always challenge the ever-popular version of God and politics that preserves an unjust status quo.

Anyway, comrades, more of that another day. Today's Gospel shows Jesus putting things right at the Temple, reminding Israel of what a meeting place between God and God's beloved people should be like. And in doing so, Jesus brings down wrath on his own head.

This is why St Paul in our 1 Corinthians reading today becomes so heated and so contrary. He distinguishes

between worldly wisdom and worldly strength, and a religion fitting in smoothly with these, and the different kind of religion that Jesus brings—a religion more in touch with the true wellsprings of Israel's faith, and more respectful of the law's actual intent, and more respectful of God's people, too. Which is something very different from what power and influence and self-righteousness typically require from religion. As ever St Paul puts Jesus' cross at the centre—that great sign of contradiction, and that great pointer to God's loving solidarity with the powerless and oppressed.

On Good Friday Jesus consents to being made the victim of worldly self-justifying arrogance and entitlement in order to expose it and set about ridding the world of it forever. No wonder some in the Roman world thought that early Christians were atheists, because they were so disrespectful of the religious status quo. Instead, our earliest ancestors in the Christian faith marched to a different drummer. Lent is about making sure that we do too.

The Lord be with you ...